

Walnuts

Beatrice Redpath

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By BEATRICE REDPATH

We consider this one of the very best stories by this popular Canadian writer. A psychological story with a denouement that will leave you gasping.



omen seem to like him, but I don't know what you will think of him." Adine Turner's tone betrayed the fact that her ideas did not entirely coincide with those of her own sex.

"Why does he interest you?" Lingard inquired, smiling across the rays of firelight. "Is it just curiosity?"

"No, not altogether. You remember Hetty Ames? Or probably you don't. She must have been just a child when you were home the last time. Well she's grown up now. I'm not going to describe her. Hetty Ames is indescribable. Besides—old Ames left her all his money. It makes a very pleasant background for her. The child seems to have lost her head completely over this Stoddard. I feel responsible in a sort of way. She met him here."

"And you think that he's—?"

"No," said Adine Turner, "I don't think that he's a fortune hunter, if that's what you mean. He appears to have plenty of money of his own. Flings it about in quite an absurd fashion. I call it bad taste. No—I think he wants to marry Hetty Ames for herself. It's not very surprising. Wait till you see her. She's utterly unspoiled in spite of everything. I've no reason on earth to interfere. I wish I had. But I know nothing about the man. Only I don't like him. There's something—I don't know what. Call it a strain of cruelty beneath the veneer. He's ridiculously popular. If it weren't for Hetty Ames—it wouldn't matter. But she's too fine for his sort. I asked you here to-night to meet him—to hear your opinion."

Lingard laughed.

“But my dear Adine,” he remonstrated, “you know that people are a closed book to me. I can’t turn them inside out, as you do. I can’t judge. Why ask me for my opinion? Your own is infinitely more valuable.”

Adine Turner rose to push a vase of flowers away from the heat of the fire that was making the petals limp. She stood with one arm extended along the low mantlepice, looking at Lingard, a puzzled expression in her eyes.

“I don’t know his type,” she said, “it’s one I’ve never come in contact with before. You’ve probably met dozens of men just like him. He’s a man who has seen a great deal of life—something of the seamy side too, in spite of his money. I wish I knew . . . just what his past has been.”

There was no time for further conversation for Hetty Ames flashed into the room. Adine Turner had not exaggerated her charm. Lingard could scarcely wonder that the man closely following her had been caught by it and held. But towards Stoddard he felt an immediate distaste. There was too much suavity, too much flattery in his tone, as he held Adine’s hand in greeting just an instant too long.

“You should have plenty to say to one another,” Adine Turner said, after her introduction of the two men, “both of you have travelled so much.”

Stoddard swept Lingard with an indifferent glance, and then turned away, ignoring him in his conversation that was threaded with names. To Lingard they meant nothing, since he had been so long away from his own country. It was easy to see that Hetty Ames was fascinated by the man. He treated her, Lingard thought, in the few moments while they waited for dinner to be announced, as though she were his for the asking.

It seemed a pity, he thought, as he listened to her clear voice, brimming with enthusiasm, that she should take for her mate a man like Stoddard. But as Adine Turner had said, there was nothing against the man, barring his personality, which for some apparently had charm. Tall, thin, and dark, he was striking-looking in appearance. Of the Latin temperament, Lingard judged, smooth on the surface, cruel beneath. He had always detested men of the sort that Stoddard represented. His own friends were more robust, more purely masculine, more openly honest and simple of heart.

Adine Turner gave Lingard a questioning glance as they passed from the room with its scarlet cushions and bowls of scarlet Chinese pottery, filled with masses of hydrangeas, through the tiny hall with its Japanese prints, to

the sombre gloom of the dining room. Lingard only returned her glance of inquiry with a smile. He had no reason on earth to express even by a glance, his objection to Stoddard. They were purely personal. He could not decry the man because of them.

The conversation skimmed the surface of things, and Lingard listened, saying little himself. Hetty Ames sat watching Stoddard, with young honest eyes that had not as yet learned to conceal the emotions of her heart and brain. Stoddard was too worldly for her, Lingard meditated, too clever, too innately selfish. She would not be able to hold him once the full fragrance of her beauty had diminished, once the glitter of her wealth had become a pleasant habit that he had adopted. For in spite of what Stoddard had himself, a fortune like the fortune old Ames must have left, was not to be disregarded.

There seemed nothing that could come in the way of it; no reason on earth why she should not marry him, if she cared for him. And it was quite apparent that she did; in a young impetuous fashion. People might even consider her fortunate, for apparently from what Lingard gathered from his conversation, he had made for himself a host of friends, with the lavish way in which he spent money, and his social capabilities. Such friends, Lingard ruminated, as demanded only a good partner at bridge, an affable manner, and a large bank account.

The dessert was on the table, low dishes of golden peaches, crimson plums and hot-house grapes, before Lingard was roused from a casual interest in what was going on around him. Stoddard had taken a walnut from the dish in front of him and was cracking it between his first finger and thumb.

Lingard leaned forward, watching the curious trick for a moment, and then he half closed his eyes while a picture flashed across his mind.

A restaurant in Valparaiso; a red tiled floor; small marble-topped tables; outside the steady white glare of the tropics; the patio with its great coarse-fronded plants; stringed instruments; the chatter of Spanish; a woman in a vivid yellow garment; a bowl of English walnuts on the table; the story the woman told of a man who could crack a walnut between his first finger and thumb.

Lingard fixed his eyes intently on Stoddard's face.

"I've only heard of one other man who could do that," he said.

Stoddard glanced at Lingard, disinterested, bored by this break in the conversation. It was Adine who, looking inquiringly at Lingard replied:

“You mean the way he cracks a walnut? I noticed it too. Isn’t it curious?” Then, turning to Stoddard with a smile, “I was just going to ask how you did it. It seems to me that it would require the strength of a Hercules.”

“It’s really very simple,” Stoddard answered with indifference. “I learned to do it years ago, and now I suppose I do it unconsciously.”

“Who was the other man who could do it?” Adine Turner inquired, looking across the table at Lingard who was watching Stoddard very intently. “Where did you know him?”

“I didn’t know him,” Lingard replied slowly, “a woman told me about a man she knew who could do it. There was quite a story attached to it. Perhaps that was why it stuck in my mind. It’s queer how one remembers . . . sometimes.”

“Do tell us about it,” pleaded Adine Turner, “it sounds interesting. Who was the woman?”

“It’s not a very pretty tale, not exactly the sort to tell at a dinner. I don’t know if you would find it interesting. I don’t know,” he went on very slowly, “if there’s much point in telling it.”

“You’ve roused our curiosity,” Adine Turner said, “please tell it.”

“Do,” Hetty Ames said eagerly, “we want to hear it.”

Lingard was looking at Stoddard and did not reply at once. Adine had been right when she had said that there was a cruel streak in the man. What a hideous awakening Hetty Ames would have some day. Could his sudden fancy be in any way possible. It would be almost too much of a coincidence. But yet . . . why not?

“I’m sure your story would be remarkably interesting,” Stoddard said, with a touch of sarcasm in his voice.

Lingard gave him a sharp glance, and then began abruptly, speaking directly to Adine.

She wasn’t the type of woman you have ever come across. I met her in a restaurant in South America. It was rather a poor sort of place. Too gay . . . too much wine . . . too many pretty women. There was a brute of a man who was making himself obnoxious to this particular woman. I

watched them for a time, and then I saw that he was going altogether too far. I got rid of him for her, and then quite naturally I sat down with her to have a glass of wine.”

“She wasn’t pretty . . . then. But there were traces of it. She was faded and bitter and disillusioned. Life had beaten her all round. I don’t say that it wasn’t largely her own fault. For it was. But it seemed to me that I held the man more to blame.”

“There happened to be a bowl of walnuts on the table. She picked up a nut and looked at it. I can remember still the curious expression in her eyes as she sat looking at it in her hand. Half mocking, half bitter, half sad, and then careless, with that awful indifferent carelessness that comes after despair has taken hold. She looked up at me with a twist to her reddened lips and said: ‘Walnuts! There was a man I once knew who could crack a walnut between his finger and thumb.’ And then she told me the whole story.”

Lingard paused, and glanced around the table. Adine Turner was listening intently, a slight wondering expression in her fine eyes, a curious intentness in her attitude. Stoddard was sitting back, his face in shadow. His eyes were strangely narrowed and there was an unpleasant expression about his mouth Lingard fancied, and wondered if it was only fancy. Hetty Ames was leaning forward, her slender ringless hands clasped on the table, her brown eyes eager with interest.

Lingard hesitated for a fraction of a moment as to whether he would go on with the story. His glance swept Stoddard’s face again. But there was nothing to be learned from it. He was waiting, merely bored, for Lingard to continue, to have done with this story and allow him to resume more pleasant topics. That was all that was to be learned from his expression.

“She had married a man who was a good deal older than herself,” he went on slowly, “and very soon she grew tired of him. She had been poor, and I imagine that she had married him, thinking that she would have all the gaiety, all the luxury and amusement for which she had been starved. But, instead, she found that she was bound to a man who had no taste for amusement. His life was given over to work. He couldn’t alter his nature to please her. I don’t know that he made the effort. What she said, was that she was disappointed with life . . . unhappy. It seemed empty and purposeless. She was restless and dissatisfied, vaguely looking for some thing with which to fill the void.”

“It was about this time that her husband made a trip to South America on business, and took her with him. She was entranced with the prospect that

the change offered, of variety and excitement. But after she had been there for a time she found that everything was much the same as it had been. Her husband was away all day and she was left alone. She had no friends; she was thrown entirely upon her own resources. And I imagine that she had none. She did not strike me as being a woman with very much intelligence. She was merely feminine and might have been rather sweet. Married to the right man I daresay her life would have been domesticated . . . after the first hunger for gaiety had died down. Living in hotels in a foreign country her life was idle and without purpose. She was in a state to be the sport of any whim . . . and it was at this time that she met this man . . . the man who could break walnuts between his finger and thumb. She never told me his name.”

“He had been connected with her husband in a business way. I don’t remember the details. My memory does not serve me there . . . or perhaps she did not go into it very lucidly. She was more concerned of course over the human side. To her, the rest seemed superfluous. Her husband was immensely wealthy and there came a time when this stranger in her life appeared to become very fond of her. She accepted his attentions at first, merely amused and gratified. Her vanity was soothed. But at length to her surprise she found that it had gone deeper than she had ever intended that it should. So much so in fact, that when his proposal finally came, that she should act as a cat’s paw in a scheme to rob her husband, she readily consented. When this plan was accomplished, it was understood between them, that they should go away together and live on the spoils.

“Poor little fool! But she could scarcely know, I suppose, with her small grasp of things, that a man who suggested such a scheme was scarcely one in whom to put any trust. The man seemed to hypnotise her . . . she was completely in his power. She said that he had great personal charm . . . and he was near her own age. They had everything in common . . . and she was terribly lonely for companionship. Well, . . . the scheme worked out as they had planned that it should. The man had brains apparently, and knew how to use them to further his own ends. Her husband lost a vast sum of money. He did not lose everything for he was enormously rich; but he lost enough to make him mad and just a little suspicious of the part which she had played in the affair. She had probed for information very cunningly, and he remembered having given her certain facts which had been used. Her husband knew of course just how the whole affair had been managed—but it was within the law of the country. He could do nothing except to make things slightly unpleasant for our friend.

“Well, she went to him just as it had all been arranged. And he laughed at her. He told her that when he married he wanted a wife who had some sense of honor. Yes—actually, he went so far as to say that. You can scarcely credit it can you? He said that he wanted a girl who was fine and sweet and young. He didn’t want her sort. He was through with her now that she had served his purpose. He was quite frank and honest with her—brutally so. She pleaded with him, implored him to take her out of the country, to let her stay if only for a while, but he wouldn’t listen. He scoffed at the very idea of such a thing. He said he was tired of her. It ended by his taking her by the shoulders and turning her out of his house.

“She took the only road that was open to her and went back to her husband. But in the meantime he had discovered just the part she had played in the affair. I can’t be sure of any of the details . . . it was rather blurred the way she told it. Her husband told her to go back to the man whose tool she had been. He said he wanted nothing more to do with her.

“She hadn’t a penny of her own. She had nowhere to go. She had no friends in the country. God knows how she even managed to exist. She got work of some sort and was discharged for incompetency. She fell lower, she struggled, and then finally . . . she gave up. She hadn’t much stamina. There wasn’t much character there with which to face hardships. She couldn’t put up a fight against life. She simply let herself be washed down with the tide. Flung like driftwood”

Lingard paused again and looked up from the spoon with which he had been playing, looked across the table at Stoddard and spoke slowly, his eyes on Stoddard’s face.

“The husband died shortly afterwards and left the remnants of his fortune to charity. The other . . . she said that she never knew what had become of him. She thought that he had probably gone to some other country and prospered. He was clever about money. He had undoubtedly managed well. She never heard of him again. I don’t know that she wanted to hear of him. She had had plenty of time to get a perspective,—to reverse her former opinions. And for all that she was, at the time I met her I imagine that she had more personality and insight into character than when she had known him. She had come to despise him as much as she had come to despise herself.”

There was silence around the table after Lingard had come to the end of his tale. He looked around him, from Adine’s grave eyes, to Hetty

Ames, whose face had a startled, almost a frightened expression. Stoddard was the first to break the silence. He broke it with a short mirthless laugh.

“That is very interesting I am sure. A fine attempt to work up one’s emotional feelings. I’m not sure that mine can be worked up in quite that fashion. It’s a little crude isn’t it? Scarcely a tale to tell at a dinner table as I think you said yourself. I’m afraid that I don’t quite see the point of it all. It doesn’t appear to hit any mark.”

Adine Turner turned from Lingard to look at Stoddard with a slow thoughtful gaze. There was understanding in her eyes, and the understanding heightened as her glance rested for the fraction of a second on the hand with which Stoddard was lifting a wine glass; a hand that clenched until the wine spilled over on the white linen mat.

Hetty Ames was looking from one to another, bewilderment on her face, bewilderment through which a startled horror was preparing to break.

“I scarcely thought it would interest you,” Lingard said slowly, his eyes upon the spreading stain. “It was only a bit of melodrama which I thought might interest—Miss Ames.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Walnuts* by Beatrice Redpath]